

Université de Montréal

Reading the Alternative Text: The Emergence of the Feminine in  
Malory's *Morte Darthur*

by

Isabelle Aouad

Département d'études anglaises  
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des arts et des sciences  
en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise en études anglaises

Août 2006

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Ce mémoire intitulé :

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présenté par :

Isabelle Aouad

a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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Dedications

To Joyce,

It is only natural that I dedicate this work to the person who has helped me get through it, with her endless patience, her enthusiasm, and her knowledge.

Thank you.

To Jessy,

In life's worst, and best, moments, you have stood by me. My best friend. My sister.

I love you.

## Résumé de synthèse

Dans *Le Morte Darthur* de Thomas Malory, le féminin se manifeste à divers niveaux du récit. L'éthos chevaleresque, qui pose en principe que les chevaliers vont au devant des femmes, leur viennent en aide et les idéalisent pour le bien de leur carrière, est en fait ce qui se trouve à la base de la destruction du concept même de la chevalerie, et aussi de l'identité masculine. Un homme, dans Malory, s'identifie en tant que chevalier, et ceci, pas par ce qu'il est, mais par ce qu'il fait, donc seulement rendant sa chevalerie/virilité performative.

Aussi, le féminin peut se trouver dans des positions de pouvoir, et ceci peut être exercé par de divers moyens, en particulier par l'utilisation de la magie. La magie, dans Malory, est souvent employée par des femmes afin qu'elles atteignent ce qu'elles désirent. La magie fournit une forme de libération des contraintes que la patriarchie a créé pour elles.

Le féminin est aussi capable de créer une unité ainsi qu'une désunité dans Malory. Les femmes agissent comme désunité dans le discours courtois parce que, quoiqu'elles soient au centre du concept de la chevalerie, leur centralité met en danger l'identité chevaleresque et masculine du chevalier. Sur le plan narratif, les femmes poussent les chevaliers à rechercher l'aventure, et par ce fait même, sur le plan métatextuel, elles envoient le texte dans différentes directions. En tant qu'unité, le féminin conserve l'hétéronormativité de la société patriarcale dans laquelle *Le Morte* est ancré.

En fin de compte, la présence féminine subtextuelle est puissante. À plus grande échelle, le féminin manipule le texte, et peut-être par cette manipulation, le

féminin, soit-il un personnage féminin ou féminisé, devient actif et gagne une certaine forme de puissance dans un monde dominé par l'idéologie patriarcale.

Mots clés : Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, femmes dans la littérature, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, performatif, chevalerie, roman courtois, roman arthurien, magie, objets magiques, pouvoir.

## Abstract

In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the feminine manifests itself on various levels of the narrative. The chivalric ethos which posits that knights court women, save and idealize them for the greater good of their career is what in fact lies at the basis of the destruction of the concept of chivalry and knighthood, and of the masculine self as well. A man, in Malory, identifies himself as a knight, and this, not through what he *is*, but through what he *does*, therefore only making his knighthood/manhood performative.

Furthermore, female power can be exerted through various means, particularly through the magical. Magic in Malory is a gendered source of power, often used by women to get what they desire. It provides a form of freedom from constraints and limits of gender set for them by patriarchy.

Finally, the feminine is both unity and disunity in Malory. Women, act as disunity in courtly discourse, for even though they are at the center of it, their centrality puts at risk knightly/masculine identity. On a narrative level, as the women send the knights on adventures, they, on the metatextual level, send the text in different directions. As unity, the feminine preserves heteronormativity in the patriarchal society in which Malory's *Morte* is set.

In the end, the subtextual feminine presence is powerful, and acts on many different levels. Ultimately, and on a larger scale, the feminine manipulates the text, and perhaps through this manipulation, the feminine, whether female or feminized, becomes active and gains a certain form of power in a world dominated by patriarchal ideology.

Key words: Thomas Malory, *Morte Darthur*, women, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, performative, gender studies, knighthood, chivalry, courtly literature, Arthurian romance, magic, magical objects, power.

## Introduction

Arthurian texts always showcase the masculine, and rarely, or almost never, the feminine. Whether in French, German, English or Welsh Arthuriana, the male world, that of kings, knights and battles, is valorized and women are only present when they are needed, in order to serve the plot. Malory's *Morte Darthur* does not differ from the body of Arthurian literature that precedes it in that it maintains its focus on Arthur and his knight's deeds, and presents them as playing important roles, which must be recorded. Morgan le Fay, Guinevere and Elaine, for example, make their appearances in the text only to help these men, provide the cause for adventure, or impede it. In this limited array of roles, woman has very little choice but to conform to the roles that are provided to her. However, a closer look at Malory's text will show that, on the contrary, the feminine is not only present when it is needed, nor is it limited to specific roles. It does not either solely reside in the "subtext," as Geraldine Heng puts it in her article, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory" (97), but appears at the surface and becomes the center of attention in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. In providing a rereading of an old text in a new way I am looking to, not only read and interpret the feminine, but to push it to *emerge* from obscurity and silence. That is, the feminine in Malory will "rise into notice, come forth from obscurity ... [and] issue from a state of subjection" (*OED* emerge 4.a). In this new light, I do not aim to read what is already written, but to reread what is already in the text but was not always really visible. It will be apparent that the subtext, or the alternative text in Malory, is invaded by everything that is feminine, female, and feminized, and the text's perspective begins to shift.

First, I wish to make an important note about the action of “reading.” Unlike Maud Burnett Mcinerney who, in her article “Malory’s Lancelot and the Lady Huntress,” reads the text to “force...[it] to reveal its secrets, or at the very least, to demonstrate that it has secrets which it intends to keep” (246), the reading I intend to do, on the contrary, inscribes the text with what is *not* written, or at least with what is not written in the literal sense of the word. I do not see secrets in a text for, as post structuralists and deconstructionists have shown, any piece of written work does not have a predetermined and stable meaning that is universal. As such, then, the meaning cannot be appropriated from the text alone, but necessarily comes from the reader’s construal of it. Roger Chartier writes,

[w]orks - even the greatest works, especially the greatest works- have no stable, universal, fixed meaning. They are invested with plural and mobile significations that are constructed in the encounter between a proposal and reception. ... [R]eading, by definition, is rebellious and vagabond. Readers use infinite numbers of subterfuges to ... read between the lines, and to subvert the lessons imposed on them. (viii-ix)

In other words, the reader mostly creates rather than consumes meaning. In this sense, the reading of Malory I will do throughout this dissertation will be against the grain, and will inscribe and extrapolate meaning, specifically feminine meaning, from a very masculine-oriented text. Janice Radway suggests, in reference to the modern romance genre, that reading the romance imparts and legitimizes female experiences and their desires, which are denied to women by patriarchy (221-22). In this sense, by looking at his female characters, at the feminine side of the text – scenes, ideas, imagery, symbolism, tropes, characters (both feminine and masculine) – which act or “perform” (Butler) a feminine role, by providing through my rereading a narrative voice to it, the feminine becomes acknowledged. I am

specifically using “perform” here in the context of Butler’s work on the performative, which posits that gender is a specific set of roles that are assigned and repeated performances or enactments that produces the fiction of a “core gender.” Before I go on further, it is important to understand that even though, to many, Malory’s work is not original, what he chooses to omit or add is quite significant. And instead of dismissing some parts of his work as being “for all intents and purposes, a mere translation,” as Vinaver writes (1534), one must look instead at the “hoole book.” Indeed, McCarthy writes, “[o]ur critical assesment must cover the overall impact of a literary recreation for which he is entirely responsible, however little he invented himself” (78). This being said then, what is often silenced in patriarchal ideology is woman, under layers of masculine deeds, acts, thoughts, ideals, and behaviors. What I read as silent in the *Morte* is the feminine alternative text that permeates Malory’s *Arthuriad*. That which refrains the feminine from rising up to equal footing with the masculine, only succeeds in further acknowledging it, and bringing it into view. The feminine is denied, yet affirmed at the same time for, to closely control and restrain the feminine, one must necessarily concentrate a fair amount of attention on it, and thus indirectly assert its importance.

But what is the “feminine”? What is a “feminine role” or, more to the point, a feminine performance? Masculinity and femininity are performances, roles, or acts that follow specific cultural rules or guidelines that may be fixed in a given society. However, were these roles to be shaken or disturbed by one gender taking on values of the other, for example, the fragile construction might start to crumble. In her essay “Feminist, Female, Feminine,” Toril Moi identifies the feminine as “a set of

culturally defined characteristics” specifically related to patriarchy (109). She writes, “patriarchy has developed a whole series of ‘feminine’ characteristics (sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility, etc.)” that become part of “metaphysical binary oppositions” that are normative (109). In other words, the feminine/female defined by patriarchy is a norm that is in essence a principle, or a standard, in that it conforms to the gendered criterion that is the feminine as patriarchy defines it. As mentioned earlier, woman is often silenced in patriarchal ideology: she is silenced under the repression that patriarchy imposes upon her as a set of “rules” or guidelines she must follow. Furthermore, this aspect of patriarchy is so imbedded in her psyche that she cannot distinguish these rules set by men from what she desires herself. This is to say, if “feminine” denotes a culturally constructed aspect of womanhood rather than a biological one, to oppose “feminine” to “masculine” in a binary opposition “is ultimately to reaffirm an essentialist and patriarchal distinction” writes Moi (230). Therefore the feminine “is not an essence but a culturally produced position of marginality in relation to patriarchal society” (230). Hence, based on this definition, Malory’s women follow this norm for they are defined and represented according to patriarchy’s characterization of the feminine. Three key terms will be used throughout my thesis: feminine, female, and feminized. “Feminine” will refer to anything relating to characteristics defining woman, “female” will strictly refer to feminine characters, and “feminized” will refer to images, tropes, symbolisms, characters, for example, that take on traits or aspects that belong to the feminine.

Therefore, Malory's *Morte* must not only be read in light of its chivalric knights' adventures and heroism, but through the representation of the feminine in terms of its female characters, as well as any discourse, act, object, or character that takes on, or assumes an aspect or trait that pertains to the feminine, such as the samite-clothed hand that emerges from the water, for example. Malory's text does not explicitly state that the hand emerging from the water to give or take back Excalibur is female. It is only assumed so because the Lady of the Lake offers the sword to Arthur. The hand is nowhere attached to the Lady herself for Arthur asks her quite clearly, "Damesell ... what swerde ys that yonder that the arme holdith aboven the water?" (35). But it has been, and still is, assumed to be feminine. In other words, the feminine I am referring to is not only the female character, but also everything that encompasses the literary display of the feminine in Malory's narrative. In his use of language, imagery, symbolism, tropes, for example, Malory permits, perhaps inadvertently, the feminine to manifest itself throughout his text. Therefore, this aspect puts into question patriarchal ideology, for repressing woman so strongly, and also puts into question any form of gender construction. That is, concepts of masculinity and femininity become interchangeable, ambivalent sometimes, and are challenged. Instead of being marginalized, the feminine becomes, to use Virginia Moran's words in her article "Malory/Guenevere: Sexuality as Deconstruction," the "center of discourse" (70). If, for example, women are not present in the scene of action, they are talked about. They also initiate, call for help, guide, lure, work magic, and give and reclaim objects that empower or weaken the knight. Furthermore, they desire the knights, and impose their wills upon

them. And the feminized, more often than not, bears aspects or traits of the feminine, even if it is not necessarily female or a woman. In other words, I will also explore how generally non-feminine objects, characters, discourses, and scenes, are feminized, how they, in certain moments of Malory's narrative, take on values, aspects or behaviors that usually belong to the feminine. Thus, the feminine spreads beyond the female character.

However, how does gender function in terms of the construction of knighthood and the chivalric code, and how do knighthood and chivalry function in relation to women and power? Within the discourse of courtly romance the knight cannot define himself without the presence of the female. In fact, "to understand Malory, we must first understand chivalry," writes Richard Barber in his article "Chivalry and the *Morte Darthur*" (19). More particularly, to understand gender constructions in Malory, one must understand chivalry. And to understand chivalry and knighthood, one must understand gender constructions in Malory. Indeed, "[l]ike many other medieval romance texts, the *Morte Darthur* focuses on the masculine activity of chivalry –fighting, questing, ruling– while simultaneously revealing the chivalric enterprise as impossible without the presence of the feminine in a subjugated position," writes Dorsey Armstrong (1). However, she adds that Malory's text differs from other texts of the same genre with its "explicit legislation (as opposed to implicit coding) of chivalric values" (1), mainly, the presence of the Pentecostal Oath. Malory describes the Oath during the beginning of Arthur's consolidation of his kingdom, where Arthur:

stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outirage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to

gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both old and younge, and every yere so were they sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste. (75-76)

It is this particular oath from which stem the gender roles that define the ideal masculine and feminine identities. The Oath tells the knights to always help those who cannot fend for themselves, i.e. women, and by extension positions women as weak and in constant need of help and protection. It also positions women as pure, for women must remain chaste and virtuous in order to inspire the knights to do greater deeds. From this Oath, then, is a compulsion that pushes the knights “to fulfill these ideals that drive the narrative of the *Morte Darthur* forward to its inevitable ending” (Armstrong 1). I agree with Armstrong, however, the Oath *alone* does not stand for the destructive end of Arthur’s story nor does it stand for the construing of gender ideals. Chivalry itself, and its whole set of rules, norms and values which dictate knightly behavior ultimately stand for the final destruction and death of many of the Arthurian characters, their chivalric ideals, and their masculine identity and manhood.

This is where the feminine steps in because it is on the feminine that the concept of chivalry relies. That is, knights’ valor and prowess is measured according to their abilities to fulfill the Oath, and especially to fulfill the clause that states that a knight must do ladies “socour.” Indeed, Malory follows a long tradition of chivalric ideals found in earlier Arthurian texts such as in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, which says:

every knight in the country who was in any way famed for his bravery wore livery and arms showing his own distinctive colour; ladies of fashion often displayed the same colours. They scorned to give their love to any man who had not proved himself three times in battle. In this way the womenfolk and women became chaste and more virtuous and for their love the knights were ever more daring. (229)

Following in the same tradition, Geoffroi de Charny also explains, in his own *Book of Chivalry*, how a knight:

should indeed honor, serve, and truly love these noble ladies and others whom I hold to be ladies who inspire men to great achievement, and it is thanks to such ladies that men become good knights and men-at-arms. Hence all good men-at-arms are rightly bound to protect and defend the honor of all ladies against all those who would threaten it by word or deed. (95)

Monmouth's text is known to be among Malory's sources, and Charny's was a contemporary of Malory as well. Even if perhaps Malory had never set eye on Charny's text, it was however quite probable that he had heard about it and the chivalric concepts in it, for the *Book of Chivalry* was quite popular during his time. In any event, Malory's Oath cultivates this same pattern concerning the chivalric duty of the knight towards women.

However, in Malory the feminine seems to be more of a menace, instead of a help, to the knight's career, and to his manhood and knighthood. I agree with Mcinerney who explains that "[w]omen are consistently represented ... as the greatest threat to chivalry" (Mcinerney 249), however, I add that if the women in Malory are represented as a threat to chivalry, the wicked ones are even more so. The Pentecostal oath clearly states that knights must "allwayes ... do ladyes, damsels, and jentilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir rygthes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe" (Malory 75). It is true the oath does not state which kind (whether good or evil) of woman a knight must help; nevertheless,

it requires a damsel in distress in order for a knight to act upon his oath. And wicked women, such as Morgan le Fay for example, do not call for, nor require, help from any knight unless it serves their purpose. On the contrary, wicked women constantly seem to want or desire the knight. In this sense, these women are a threat because they put knights in positions where they cannot, or are not allowed to, act upon their chivalric duties. This puts their honor at stake for they cannot follow what their oath dictates.

To return to the performative aspect of the feminine, the masculine and chivalry, the threat that the feminine poses underlines the fragile gender construction linked to chivalry and knighthood. This happens for, as Heng states, “the feminine materializes in order to be inducted into providing the enabling conditions of the chivalric enterprise” (251). It furthermore puts into question the ideologies of chivalry and knighthood, and by extension, the masculine self of the knight. A man identifies himself as a knight, and this not through what he *is*, but only through what he *does*. And if he cannot act upon his oath, his identity as a man, and his identity as a knight worthy of that appellation, and ultimately his self as a gendered heterosexual subject proves ultimately to be unstable, hence, “performative.” Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, “if gender attributes ... are not expressive but performative, then these attributes ... constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (140). This is why Morgan le Fay, for example, does not need the trope of the knight-saving-the-lady for she does not perform the role a woman should; that is, she is not in need of any help from a knight, but instead uses her own power to exercise her will. In this sense she becomes a threat to a Lancelot, and to his own

self and identity for she desires him and uses her magic to imprison him until he yields to her, as I will discuss in chapter three. Here is an instance where gendered construction becomes ambivalent, for what is usually the source of desire, i.e. woman, becomes the one who desires, in other words, the subject. Morgan desiring Lancelot for example, and not vice versa, creates a shift. Lancelot becomes the desired object and Morgan the subject who desires. Therefore, if much of all that is feminine is objectified, then, arguably, much of what is objectified is *feminized* (and not necessarily feminine). Hence, I will show how Lancelot is feminized through Morgan's desire and restless pursuing.

Also, Foucault shows that power does not belong to any type of gender, person, or community. Power is not a possession; it is an exertion. Patriarchy, according to Gerda Lerner, is "in its wider definition ... the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance ... over women in society in general" (239). If this implies that men hold power on all levels of society, and that women are not allowed to have access to such forms of power, "it does not [however] imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources" (Lerner 239). The women of Malory's world can be in positions of power according to certain situations and behavior conduct. This means that power structures are reversible, and do not only belong to men/knights. In other words, if a man/knight can be feminized, because his identity is unstable and only performative in terms of the binary constructions of gender within the context of chivalry, then female power is also possible, for the feminine can take on active roles. For instance, Arthur and Guinevere's positions in the chivalric discourse are particularly interesting. After his

first wars and solidification of his reign over Camelot, Arthur no longer goes on adventures, or at least not as often as he did. On the contrary, exactly like the female figure of the courtly romance, or like Guinevere, he sends away his knights to seek adventures and prove their worth as his knights while he stays in his castle awaiting their return. The king is a feminized figure in this instance. More precisely, he is not feminine, in that he still “acts like a man,” but his power is exerted through the feminine trope of the heroine of courtly romance. However, the reverse can be argued as well. The courtly heroine, Guinevere for example, like the king, exerts her queenly powers, sends her knights away to seek adventures, and awaits for them to return with their winnings. Here, she stands as a kingly figure who gains possessions and lands through the prizes of her knights. Therefore, the feminine will is, arguably, capable of being exercised through the medium of knightly discourse and knightly deeds. Power, hence, in the context of Malory’s chivalric discourse, is not completely limited to gender. It is *how* it is used, rather than *who* uses it. However, if the feminine makes use of it, then, in an inverted way, power takes on the feminine aspect as well. And if the feminine can take over masculine power, i.e. reverse the roles, this means that women can also benefit from the same privileges that patriarchy offers to men, and by extension create vulnerability among her masculine peers for she would have the power to take over them, or at least, be their equal.

Chapter one, entitled “The Feminine and Chivalric Performance” explains how this very ideology of chivalry, based on knights courting women, saving them, and idealizing them for the greater good of their career is what, in fact, lies at the basis of the destruction of, not only the concept of chivalry and knighthood, but of

the masculine self as well. The knight must constantly prove himself worthy of the chivalric code, otherwise, he fails as a gendered entity. Knights depend upon helpless women to send them off on adventures in order for them to define themselves.

The second chapter, "The Rhetoric of Enchantment and The Feminine," illustrates how female power can be exerted through various means, particularly, though not restricted to, the magical. I will explore how magic, as a gendered source of power, is used in the hands of women. I will argue that the fascinating aspect of magic is that it provides a form of freedom from constraints and limits of gender set for women by patriarchy. Magic is the language of the repressed. I will explain how Malory's narrative suggests that magic is inherently a feminine possession, and perhaps its personal weapon. Merlin, being the only male who possesses magic, is unable to properly use it when Nymue imprisons him; however, magic almost always serves well the women who use it. Magic is a form of "weapon." It is the only "operation of the feminine transacting its [the feminine's] intentions without permission, deploying agents and instruments at will to devise acts of often superior force and efficacy to the mere efforts of armed chivalry" (Heng 258). In addition to magic, the feminine is also manifested through the multitude of objects that the ladies disperse. The women who act as givers and takers of items either endow the knight with power with what they give, or create chaos with what they take away. On many occasions, they specifically state that the objects they give to knights must be returned to them. If the knights refuse to return these objects, they must pay dearly, which is especially the case with Balin. Also, some of these objects are

specifically masculine in their usage and symbolism, for example the sword. Provided by women, and taken back by them, the significance of the sword suddenly alters. It is not anymore an inherently masculine, or phallic object, as traditional symbology or archetypal theory defines it, but starts to take on a more feminine significance, thus creating a certain ambivalence and a shift in meaning. The Freudian concept of the “uncanny” will aid in this discussion for both Nymue and Morgan le Fay’s images play with the aspect of the familiar unfamiliar. This is to say, when one thinks Nymue is the “good” female character, she literally entombs Merlin alive in a most uncanny way; whereas when one thinks Morgan is “evil,” she is the one who takes Arthur away to heal him of his deadly wounds.

The third chapter is entitled “The Feminine as Unity or Disunity?” This chapter draws a conclusion and synthesizes the place of the feminine in Malory’s *Morte*. The feminine is both unity and disunity in Malory. I will explain first how women act as disunity in courtly discourse, for even though they are at the center of it, their centrality puts at risk knightly/masculine identity, as I have discussed above. On a narrative level, as the women send the knights on adventures, they, on the metatextual level, send the text in different directions. As unity, the feminine “is located as both the inner and the utterly outside” (LaFarge 264), and “encompass[es] and symbolically fix[es] the entire realm of human possibility –good and evil, success and failure, protection or destruction” (Heng 98). In the end, the subtextual feminine presence is powerful, and acts on many different levels, which operates like a large web of interconnections. It is the pillar of Malory’s text, and at the same time, it is disruptive of knightly/gender ideology. Ultimately, it could be said that, on

a larger scale, the feminine manipulates the text, and perhaps through this manipulation, the feminine, whether female or feminized, gains a certain form of power in a world dominated by patriarchal ideology.

It is important to read Malory's text through the acts and discourses, direct or indirect, of women in order to understand how the feminine permeates the narrative. By following the thread of the story through the women, instead of following it through the men or the knights' deeds and discourses, the feminine seems to take on a more "active" role. The main women I will discuss in this thesis will be Guinevere, Morgan le Fay, and the Lady of the Lake/Nymue.<sup>1</sup> I will also mention more briefly the unnamed huntress of book XVIII, Elaine of Astolat and Elaine of Corbyn, as well as some of the minor feminine characters who infiltrate the text, such as the maidens and ladies who often lure, guide or seek help from a knight. In the end, power lies in silence, for what is not said often puts into question dominant ideologies. As Jacqueline Murray writes, "rather than abandon the quest" for the search for woman, one must "interpret from silence, and . . . reread old sources in new ways" (2) to inscribe the text with what is *not* written. That which refrains the feminine from rising up on equal footing with the masculine, only succeeds in further acknowledging it, and raising it into view. That is to say, the feminine is denied, yet affirmed at the same time for, to closely control and restrain the feminine, one must necessarily concentrate a fair amount of attention on it, and thus indirectly assert its importance. While Helene Cixous writes that, "[e]ither a woman is passive or she does not exist," I will show that passive women exist and are

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<sup>1</sup> Because Malory has multiple names for the same character, for the purpose of this thesis I will address Nyneve under the name of Nymue, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.

actually empowered through their passivity (64). Being passive does not allow much room to exist in any case, and so, by rereading what is already present in the text the feminine, passive or seemingly non-existent, will rise into notice, emerge, and become active.

Chapter 1

**The Feminine and Chivalric Performance**

Malory's sources, especially the French ones, such as the Lancelot-Grail Cycle or Chretien de Troyes' Arthurian romances, have a greater emphasis on and presence of women in general. Malory, however, visibly reduces the roles of women, which some scholars have interpreted as a " 'de-feminization' of his source material," as Dorsey Armstrong suggests (1). In fact, the *Morte* is "essentially military" while the French texts are centered more on emotions, feelings and "long soliloquies" (McCarthy 91). In Malory, there is little interest in love, but more emphasis on war, jousting, battles and combats. In other words, Malory is more interested in the chivalric enterprise of knighthood, than in women. However, it is this aspect in the *Morte Darthur* that is particularly fascinating for, as writes Andrew Lynch, "the role of Malory's women can often be ... understood through their implication in the language of knightly combat" (xix). This means that knightly culture, and its codes, is, to an extent, shaped by the presence of the feminine. More precisely, knightly and chivalric performance in Malory's *Morte* cannot be understood, or assumed, without the presence of the feminine.

Arthur Brittan, in his work *Masculinity and Power*, makes a statement that helps define the concepts of gender I will be working with in this chapter. He writes:

Gender is never simply an arrangement in which the roles of men and women are decided in a contingent and haphazard way. At any given moment, gender will reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not. Masculinity, therefore, does not exist in isolation from femininity—it will always be an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in relation to women. And these images are often contradictory and ambivalent. (3)

As such, gender is a complex behavioral code that is shaped and fashioned, "at any given moment," by those in possession of power. In Malory's text, those in

possession of power are men, i.e. patriarchal society, especially men in positions of power such as kings, fathers, and knights. And the way these types of men view themselves cannot be dissociated from their involvement with the feminine, or from their own view about the feminine and women in general. In this sense, in Malory's *Morte*, "[t]he image of knightly culture on which that civilization is posited must assume feminine presence and assistance for its completion" (Heng 97). And at the same time, for this sense of completion to be complete, chivalry and knighthood must "also constitute the feminine in essentially subsidiary relation to the masculine" (97). The *Morte Darthur* story involves knights, chivalry and fighting, but where women or the feminine have only supporting roles. But this also means that power structures in relation to gender are reversible, and only performative, for if the feminine, on which the knightly Oath relies, takes on different positions of power, as I will explain later in this chapter, it can destabilize the pre-established power notions men have.

Indeed, early on, in the story of Arthur, gender rules are already being established, even before the Pentecostal Oath is created. This happens in many episodes. For example, when Igraine is summoned to King Arthur's court, she is asked to tell the truth about Arthur's birth and lineage. There, Sir Ulphuns does not believe her and challenges her words. In order to defend herself, she states, "I am a woman and I may nat fyght; but rather than I should be dishonoured, there wolde som good man take my quarell" (30). Malory here clearly suggests that a woman is helpless and that she is in need of a "good man" to take up her "quarell." Moreover, this aspect establishes the rules for men, knights particularly, and their duties to help

women in their troubles, and positions these women as inferior to men in terms of strength and protection.

Another aspect of gender roles and women's subservience appears in a rather more violent episode, also at the beginning of Arthur's reign. It happens soon after Arthur is crowned king, in the opening section of the *Morte's* narrative. Malory goes into detailed accounts of the king's battles against the Roman Empire to gain territory and valor. During this episode, Arthur comes across a giant who has abducted and raped a duchess. After a few encounters with that giant, Arthur finally defeats him, and by extension neutralizes any eventual threat towards women, in terms of rape. It is first important to note that the act of rape, often present in Arthurian romances, is necessary in constructing gender codes of behavior. It is necessary, for here again it posits women as weak and in constant need of help from a masculine entity. It also suggests, as Jeffery Cohen writes, that Arthur's defeat of the giant "is a social fantasy of the triumph of corporeal order (in all of its various meanings) written as a personal drama, a vindication of the right channeling of multiple somatic drives into a socially beneficial expression of masculinity" (xii). In other words, through the act of conquest, even though he could not save the lady, Arthur is establishing the figure of a man/king/knight who has the duty to save/help women, and who is also capable of creating and containing a body of "community," to use Cohen's term, which reduces external threat of the unknown. This unknown threat can also come from a woman who escapes the boundaries of gender, as I will demonstrate in this chapter. And as such, Arthur is also building a specific chivalric and knightly society/community that defines gender boundaries. This, in other

words, makes of him a “hero” (Cohen’s terminology), one who is capable of producing an empire, a body politic, a defining gender ideal. And by killing this outside threat that the giant poses, Arthur is setting the first example of knightly/masculine behavior. Hence, this monstrous threat is subdued, and by this example Arthur is setting the knightly one as he is also placing the feminine at a subservient position.

Furthermore, the role of the feminine in subjection to the masculine is necessary to Malory’s work, not solely for the knightly enterprise, but for purposes of reproduction. These women are employed and valorized for the purpose of producing future knights who will play important roles in the greatness and demise of Arthur’s kingdom. For instance, Elaine of Corbyn, future mother of Galahad, the most beautiful maiden after Guenevere, is held prisoner, by enchantment, until the flower of knighthood rescues her. As soon as Lancelot rescues her, her father, King Pellès, does everything to make him sleep with his daughter, for, as Malory states, “the kynge knew well that sir Launcelot shulde gete a pუსyll uppon his doughtir, whyche shulde be called sir Galahad” (479). Fathers, kings, and other witches, or wizard in Merlin’s case, who are at the service of these patriarchs, control the female body. Moreover, the way these women are perceived to be, i.e. good, evil, lusty, for example, and their relationship with the men with whom they beget their sons, seems to influence how the reader perceives them too. That is, if a woman is pure and good, according to patriarchal perceptions of women, she is shown to be forced, in one way or another, into a sexual relationship she does not necessarily want. However, if she desires the relationship, or rather, the man, the fruit of their passion

is evil. This is particularly true in the cases of the three women to be discussed below: Igraine, mother of Arthur; Morgause, mother of Mordred; and Elaine of Corbyn, mother of Galahad.

The *Morte Darthur* opens with Uther, a “lusty” king (Malory 5) who passionately desires Igraine, even though he knows she is married. The text suggests that the only reason Uther wants Igraine is because she is “called a fair lady and a passynge wyse” (5). Merlin offers his help and, with enchantment, tricks Igraine by giving Uther the physical appearance of her husband. From this union Arthur is born, the future king of Camelot. As soon as Igraine learns of this trick, she is silenced: “So she mourned pryvely and held hir pees” (5). There is absolutely no regard for what Igraine thinks or wants, there is no regard for the mourning of her husband, or any regard when her baby is later taken away from her. She is forced to remain silent on all matters. It seems that it is important that Igraine be tricked into sleeping with Uther, for she is “a passing good woman and wold not assente unto the kyng” (3). Women in Malory are talked about in binary terms of good and evil, and if Igraine were to remain a good woman, so that a good son could come out of her relation with Uther, she has to be *forced* into sleeping with him. Were she to desire Uther the same way he desired her, she would have been called a lusty woman, and by extension an evil one. Morgause’s case will explain why.

Morgause is the anti-thesis of Igraine for she willingly goes to Arthur’s bed, even while she is a married woman and half-sister to Arthur. In fact, like Igraine, Morgause almost never appears again in the story after this episode. Clearly, her presence in the plot only serves the purpose of procreation, exactly like Igraine’s.

Morgause is used to beget Mordred, the one destined to destroy Arthur's kingdom. And because Mordred is born out of an unholy relationship, — Morgause and Arthur are half-siblings, — Mordred's outcome cannot be that of a good knight. Malory describes Morgause to be "a passynge fayre lady," (27) and this is enough for Arthur to desire her. However, the only difference between her and Igraine, or any of the other women whose bodies are used solely to procreate future knights, is that Morgause goes to Arthur's bed willingly. It is true that Malory writes that it is Arthur who "caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her" (27), however, soon after, he mentions that "they were agreed, and he begate uppon hir sir Mordred" (27). No father, husband, or other patriarch tricks or orders her to do so. And because of this factor, — not to mention that of incest, — she is seen as a "bad" woman, in contrast to a being a "good" woman, who is pure like Igraine or, later, Elaine. Furthermore, Malory already describes her as an enemy for he writes that she comes to Arthur's court "in maner of a message," but that in reality she comes "to aspye the courte of kynge Arthure" (27).

Elaine of Corbyn's case is not so different from Igraine's. She is also a pure lady, one whose purity is maintained by an enchantment that held her in "the fayryste towre that ever [Lancelot] saw" (477). For five years she has not left this place, imprisoned there, and in "payne" (478) until the "floure of knyghthode" comes to deliver her, by the touch of his hand. It is convenient that the flower of knighthood is none other than Lancelot, the perfect knight who must be united with the "fayryst lady of that contrey" (478). Elaine's body is then further controlled by her father, King Pelles, who wishes to fulfill a prophecy by tricking Lancelot into

sleeping with her, in order to beget Galahad (480). It is necessary that Elaine remains pure. Not only pure in body, but also pure in soul and spirit, in the sense that she is not the one initiating the desire. In other words, for Galahad, “the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntrey shulde be brought oute of daunger; and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved” (479), to be born, Elaine has to remain the non-desirous participant in the game so that she is not viewed by her contemporaries as a bad woman, like Morgause for example. But underneath the fact that these women are being used and manipulated for procreation, is another fact, and it is that an important part of the chivalric ethos is based on the feminine. This is to say that these women are needed to be subservient, silent, or tricked in order for all the prophecies to come true, in order for all these knights or king to be born. If these women were to voice their concerns or their denials, or even to voice their desires openly, they would become like Morgan le Fay, the evil character, whom I will discuss later at length.

What is interesting to this present study is that these gender ideals, which are established at both the beginning of Malory’s text and Arthur’s reign, come to be scrutinized by the evolution and progression that forms chivalric and knightly society. Indeed, these ideals are closely looked at through knightly performance. The means these performances use provide ways of maintaining a certain unity and consistency in masculine identity. By extension, these ideas are examined by any potential threat posed to the knightly orders. And whatever these potential threats are, they are caused by the feminine. These threats are countless, but to name a few, Uther’s desire for Igrayne, which cause the death of Igraine’s husband, her silence

and Arthur's birth; Arthur desiring his sister Morgause, which results in the birth of Mordred, future destroyer of Arthur's kingdom; and Arthur's subsequent marriage to Guenevere against Merlin's warnings, which also sets in motion the series of events that will push Arthur's kingdom towards its tragic end. All these events contribute to the potential threats the feminine poses. For instance, Merlin warns Arthur not to marry Guenevere for she is "nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Lancelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne" (59). Arthur does not heed this warning because, arguably, only one thing is important to him: the Round Table that comes with Guenevere. As Malory writes, Arthur states openly, "I love Gwenvyvere, the kynges doughtir of Lodegrean, of the londe of Camelerde, the whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde that ye tolde me he had hit of my fadir Uther" (59). And as a plus to the gift that comes with the queen, Arthur adds, "And this damesell is the moste valyaunte and fayryst that I know lyvyng, or yet that ever I coude fynde" (59). He desires the Table and not the woman, and for that, he will disobey Merlin and his warnings.

However, Malory's choices of omitting or adding episodes is quite important in that it considerably adds to the understanding of different themes present in the *Arthuriad*. One of the most notable episodes he does add by his own volition is the Oath. When Arthur claims his bride Guenevere—and with her the Round Table—he is anchoring chivalric ideals into knightly deeds and behaviors, for it is during his marriage to Guenevere that the Pentecostal Oath takes place. This symbol of the duties of knighthood and chivalry immediately include the presence of women among the duties of a knight in general. Here, Arthur is solidifying his reign with his

marriage, and is at the same time beginning to build his round table. And, by adding this formal procedure of taking a specifically formulated oath during a special event like the Pentecost, every year, Malory and Arthur are officially setting particular knightly and chivalric conduct guidelines that knights must follow. Not only are they setting this specific code, but also do so at the beginning of the tale and Arthur's reign. The resulting effects are twofold. First, as Armstrong writes, "the rest of the narrative tests those chivalric rules, attempting to see how (and if) they function successfully in a variety of circumstances" (7). And second, in representing this ideal chivalric community, Malory, perhaps unintentionally, creates and defines various models of gender identity on which the whole of the action heavily relies. Hence, knighthood and chivalry set the rules for gender behaviors and constructs in the *Morte*. More precisely, it tries to define how knights understand and construct themselves as men in a given society.

In the following parts of this chapter, in order to show how the feminine is present at every level of the code, I will look at how chivalry is understood in Malory, how the knights understand their knighthood and identity. That is, I will specifically look at some of the workings of knighthood and chivalry in Malory's text. I will also explore in greater detail the particular mechanics of the Pentecostal Oath. Then I will look at how the feminine, the female and the feminized engage with chivalry, knighthood and the Oath, and how they play an essential part in the entire concept of chivalry and knighthood. One will come to realize that when the Oath is given it fails to work, in the end, for it creates a restrictive dynamics between gender and the self that ultimately becomes destructive.

Beverly Kennedy defines three types of knights in Arthurian romance: the heroic knight, the true knight, and the worshipful knight. The first type of knight, the heroic knight, belongs to the nobility and is a privilege. A heroic knight is one who is skilled in battle and loyal to his lord. He is the one who follows in pursuit of family feuds, like Gawain, for example. The second kind, the true knight, is one who is religious, a follower of God, often found in Grail romances. He is not only skilled in battle, but he is also chaste, humble and pious. A good example is Galahad. And the third type of knight, the worshipful knight, finds his roots in the courtly cultures of the time. He is the one often described in the courtly romances. He is loyal to both his lord and his lady; he is strong in battle but also has the qualities of a courtier. That is, he is courteous, possesses justice and strength of judgment (Kennedy 3-4). Lancelot is the courtly knight *per excellence*, and this type of knight is the one most at risk in terms of the feminine, as I will show in this following section.

#### Courtly Love and Feminine Discourse:

When it comes to courtly love, the rules of chivalry and knighthood are very strict and the demands made upon a knight can often become contradictory, to say the very least. The Pentecostal Oath, which Malory adds as an extra element to the chivalric code, strongly suggests that he is indeed trying to establish a certain order of chivalry in his retelling, a certain order that is not wholly established in preceding Arthurian literature. The conventions of chivalry, in most romances, already dictate very particular codes of behaviours knights must follow in order to show their prowess and “noblesse” (Ruff 107). However, as it is often the case with Malory and

other romances of the era, “[s]ome of the best chivalric works put the knight into the contradictory position of having to choose between loyalty to his lady and loyalty to his lord, the exact predicament of Lancelot” (Ruff 103). And loyalty is, above all, the most important aspect of knighthood, as writes Ramon Lull in his *Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, a text that was widely known in Malory’s time (Lull 49). Lull states quite clearly, “false men and traitours ought to be destroyed” (49). And Malory himself states in his Oath that every knight must “allwayes . . . fle treson” (75).

In addition, the link between courtly love and tournaments is not new to Malory in that it already exists in older Arthurian texts, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*. During a scene where the nobles are gathering at Arthur’s court, Monmouth writes, in an attempt to explain how chivalric behavior came to be linked with courtly love,

every knight in the country who was in any way famed for his bravery wore livery and arms showing his own distinctive colour; ladies of fashion often displayed the same colours. They scorned to give their love to any man who had not proved himself three times in battle. In this way the womenfolk and women became chaste and more virtuous and for their love the knights were ever more daring. (229)

In the *Morte Darthur*, Lancelot and Guenevere are the perfect example of performing the roles that are required from a knight and his lady in courtly conduct. First, Malory makes it clear that Guenevere falls in love with Lancelot for his worshipfulness and prowess, in other words, for his “knightly virtues,” as states Kennedy (7). Malory writes,

But in especiall hit was prevyde on sir Lancelot de Lake, for in all turnements, justys and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes, and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treson

other inchauntement. So this sir Lancelot encrested so mervaylously in worship and honoure; ... Wherefore quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chivalry. (149)

As a knight should always save and help a lady, Lancelot does when it comes to Guenevere. And as a lady should bestow her favors upon the knight, so does Guenevere on Lancelot. Moreover, she calls for him when in danger, she sends him on different adventures and she even rebukes him when she is angry, or especially when he has done something that is not in accordance with her will. In all these actions, she is the one who is at the basis of the courtly code of conduct. Even the text seems to acknowledge that Guenevere is the cause and source of Lancelot's actions, for later in the *Morte* a damsel accuses him of being under the spell of Guenevere. The damsel says to him,

I cowed never here sey that ever ye loved any of no maner of degre, and that is grete pyte. But hit it noysed that ye love quene Gwenyvere, and that she hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that ye shall never love none other but hir, nother none other damesell ne laday shall rejoyce you; wherefore there be many in this londe, of hyghe astate and lower, that make grete sorrow. (160)

Hence, the feminine instigates many aspects of chivalric actions, which, incontestably, has the effect of always reminding the knight of his Oath.

#### Knighthood, The Feminine and Male Identity

Over and over again, and throughout the entire tale, knights of the Round Table make mention of the Oath, as a reminder of their good actions or wrongful actions of other knights. Sir Uwayne, to whom a lady "made hir complaynte ... of two knyghtes" who had disinherited her, blames them,

for they do ayenste the hyghe Order of Knighthode and the oth that they made. And if hit lyke you I woll speke with hem, because I am a knyght of kyng Arthurs, and to entrete them with fayreness; and if they woll nat, I shall do batayle with hem ... in the defence of your right. (107-108)

Another instance of a knight recalling the Oath happens when Lancelot is riding with a lady and she tells him that “here by this way hauntys a knyght that dystressis all ladyes and jantylwomen, and at the leste he robbyth them other lyeth by hem” (160). Lancelot is abashed and exclaims,

What?...is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravyssher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of Knyghthode, and contrary unto his oth. ... But fayre damsel, ye shall ryde on before yourself, and I woll kepe myself in coverte; and yf that he trowble yow other dystresse you I shall be your rescowe and lerne hym to be ruled as a knyght. (160)

The examples are endless. Through this constant reference to the Oath, the text seems to be reminding its readers that the knights are well aware of their perception of themselves as knights, of other knights, and of what is to be a “good” or “worshipful” knight. They constantly live by the Oath to the point where they almost forget they are men. In other words, Malory’s knights see themselves as knights first, and only then as men. This aspect appears often in Malory: for a knight to feel masculine, worshipful, in other terms, knightly, he needs the assistance of the feminine, as I will discuss in the following paragraph.

In order to be a worshipful knight, a knight’s duty is, first and foremost, to save the damsels in distress, as his knightly oath states. Armstrong writes, “[k]nights in Malory always read women as vulnerable, helpless, and ever in need of the services of a knight—in short, the object through and against which a knight affirms his masculine identity” (36). This means that the clause, “and allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and

never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe” (75), intentionally *constructs* women as “feminine,” i.e. typically womanly in the most patriarchal misogynistic sense of helpless, weak, needy, and so on, as I had mentioned earlier. In these socially constructed gender ideals, this also means that a knight needs to do what a woman *cannot* do, he *needs* to fight because she *cannot* fight, he needs to wield a sword because she *cannot* wield one. A knight, thus, affirms “his knightly identity of the Arthurian court” and this, not only because he “*needs* a vulnerable woman, but more specifically, [because] he needs ‘woman’ to *signify* as vulnerable and helpless” (Armstrong 36). Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, argues that legal systems of power actually create the very subjects they stand for (139-140). The Oath then constructs the masculine and the feminine as such: the masculine, and by extension the knight, is strong, powerful, dominant, and active. The feminine is frail, helpless, submissive, and passive. This generates what Judith Butler recognizes as “a false stabilization of gender in the interests of . . . heterosexual construction” (135). The gender constructs that the Oath produces proves to be unstable, and “false,” for the masculine shows to heavily rely on the feminine to define itself.

This facet of performative masculinity and knighthood manifests itself in various ways, among which I will discuss two. First, and the most obvious, is when a knight conceals his identity from view, by using a feminine disguise. And second, is when a knight is in a one-on-one combat with another knight. These two particular instances happen quite often in Malory, at various times in the narrative, but in order to illustrate my point, I will first look at Lancelot’s behavior during the tournament of Surluse and, second, at the one-on-one battle he has with Tarquyn.

During the tournament at Surluse, Lancelot is seen wearing female garb in an attempt to reverse a joke and mock Dinadan, who had himself first attempted unsuccessfully to trick Lancelot into jousting with him (Malory 399). Malory describes the scene as such:

And as he was departed, sir Lancelot disgysed himself and put upon his armour a maydyns garmente freysshely attired. Than sir Lancelot made sir Galyhodyn to lede hym thorow the raunge, and all men had wondir what damesell was that. And so as sir Dynadan cam into the raunge, sir Lancelot, that was in the damesels aray, gate sir Galyhodyns speare and ran unto sir Dynadan. (410)

One can very quickly come to the conclusion that Lancelot is here a feminized figure, because he is dressed as a woman, however, it is not the case. In fact, Malory's text suggests that Lancelot's feminine costume only succeeds in increasing or affirming his masculinity, and by extension his knighthood. As soon as Dinadan is defeated, Lancelot reveals himself and his strength. Malory writes, "Then by all the assente they gaff sir Lancelot the pryce; the next was sir Lameroke de Galys" (410). His masculinity is intact and only the more reaffirmed for Lancelot wins the first prize, which not only commands the respect of other knights for his prowess, but also confirms him as the strongest knight among all the others. Lancelot is not feminized for he *voluntarily* takes upon himself the dress of a damsel. As the jousting match is over and Lancelot proves himself the winner, he has the effect of astonishing the crowd and Dinadan with his masculine prowess. Dinadan immediately recognizes the *possibility* that this damsel is Lancelot for, as Malory writes, he:

loked up thereas sir Launcelot was, and than he sawe one sytte in the stede of Sir Launcelot armed. But whan sir Dynadan saw a maner of a damesell, he

dradde perellys lest hit sholde be sir Launcelot disgysed. But sir Launcelot cam on hym so faste that he smote sir Dynadan over his horse croupe. (410)

Hence, Lancelot's use of the feminine only reasserts his own masculinity. In this particular episode, the feminine is used, not to destabilize gender barriers, but to reinforce masculinity and manhood, and, in other words, to maintain masculine/feminine gender binaries.

Another way a knight performs his masculinity is through battle with another knight, be it during a jousting tournament or face-to-face combat. Knights, in fact, *men*, in Malory always look at each other. When they are to joust against each other or go into face-to-face battle, each measures up his opponent. These moments seem to take place especially when a knight/man's worth, that is, honor, reputation, prowess, ability to save ladies, is put into question and the outcome decided through contest or combat. Kathleen Coyne Kelly suggests that

[w]hile endless play along a chain of identities may be possible in theory, the actual positions available are limited by a given culture's normative practices. 'Intermale surveillance,' is, seemingly, as necessary to the maintenance of masculine identity as is the monitoring of women and their bodies. (54)

In other words, it is not only the distinction and differentiations that are to be upheld, but the similarities as well, for a man identifies himself as a worthy, good, noble knight through his opposition with knights, either less worthy than him or equally powerful and worthy as him. A particular example of this instance takes place in a face-to-face combat between Lancelot and Tarquyn, "the beste knyght and the myghtyeste ... ever" (156). Upon hearing that Tarquyn is practically unbeatable, Lancelot agrees to match with him because he needs to prove that he still is the best knight in the realm. He even tells the damsel that needs his help that "all youre

entente, damesell, and desyre I woll fulfyller, if ye woll brynge me unto this knyght” (157). Their combat proves him right for “they fared two owres and more, trasyng and rasyng eyther othir where they might hitte ony bare place. Than at the laste they were breathless bothe, and stone lenyng on her swerdys” (157-58). Tarquyn is of course no match for Lancelot and declares his capitulation in the following terms:

Thou art the byggyst man thatever I mette withal, and the best-brethed, and as lyke one knyght that I hate abovyn all other knightes. So be hit that thou be not he, I wol lyghtly acorde with the [...] ...And thou and I woll be felowys togedyrs and never to fayle whyle that I lyve. (158)

Lancelot’s knightly value is unscathed and even the more glorified through his winning against the mightiest knight ever. His masculinity is intact as well, for he reasserts his identity within patriarchy by referring to his lineage and his position in the realm of Arthur. “I am sir Lancelot du Lake,” he declares, “kyng Bannys son of Benwyke, and verry knyght of the Table Rounde” (158).

However, these events, especially the cross-dressing, unveil a certain weakness in the knight’s masculine identity construction. A gender taking on the costume of his opposite is not always positively seen. The Bible, a text that strongly influenced medieval attitudes, beliefs and gender ideals, clearly states: “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abominations unto the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 22.5). This means that a man or a woman cross-dressing is not always easily accepted, for if a man can dress as a woman and have the benefits or, in this case, the disadvantages of a woman’s position, depending from which point of view it is looked at, a woman, then, can also dress as a man and have the benefits that are associated with being male. Louise Olga Fradenburg states that “the desire

of knight and king, in romance and in tournament, to efface identity, is produced by the desire to prove the incontestability of identity” (207-8). This also means that the strong desire of a knight to prove that his own masculinity is “incontestable” by taking on and off feminine garb shows how his sense of masculinity is easily broken and limited.

This is particularly true when knights are without their armor, and can be mistaken for women. In the episode where Lancelot is captured by Morgan le Fay and the three other queens, Lancelot is held captive but then escapes with the help of a young woman who releases him from his prison. He ends up in the forest, comes across a pavilion and falls asleep inside, on a bed. An hour later, another knight comes in and hops in bed with Lancelot thinking it is his ladylove waiting for him:

Than within an owre there com that knyght that ought the pavylyon. He wente that his lemman had layne in that bed, da so he Leyde hym adowne by sir Launcelot and toke hym in his armys and began to kysse hym. And whan sir Launcelot felte a rough berde kyssyng hym he sterte oute of the bedde lyghtly, and the othir knyght aftir hym. And eythir of hem gate their swerdys in their hondis[.] ...And there by a lytyll slad sir Launcelot wounded hym sore nyghe unto the deth. (153)

Malory briefly mentions that Lancelot removes his armor and lies down on the bed. This removal of the armor, as Kelly suggests, is “an outward sign of masculinity” for Lancelot, by doing so, “leaves himself open ... for different interpretation” (61). Therefore, the only other masculine signifier that Lancelot has is his sword. The text does not elaborate on Lancelot’s reactions other than both knights “gate their swerdys in their hondis” and “sir Launcelot wounded hym sore” (153). However, in a society in which love and desire are directed solely towards women, and come from men, knights can relate to one another without being “threatened” to love

another man in the same way they would love a woman. Upon seeing each other's swords drawn, they recognize each other as men, and as such, in this context, could not possibly think to kiss each other as a man and a woman would, and therefore, Lancelot could not possibly be a woman. The feminine is the Other, the entity which receives the love and desire from the One, the masculine. As long as the feminine remains the Other, the masculine, and by extension the knight, remains the One against everything else is compared and measured. In this sense, the feminine creates and maintains heteronormativity, an element crucial in maintaining a knight's understanding of his masculinity and manhood.

Furthermore, one of the ways knights seem to affirm their masculinity is, as Sheila Fisher writes, "to trivialize women or to try to dismiss them" (150). Indeed, as I had mentioned in my introductory chapter, women are present in Malory's *Morte* to seek help, send knights on adventure or try to lure them into their traps. These women do not make appearances as fully active subjects, but rather, they appear in order to become drawn into the formation of masculine chivalric identities. This also suggests that male bonding among the knights is confirmed yet at the same time vulnerable because threatened by women. As a result there is a sense of uneasiness about masculinity and knighthood, in which women, in Malory, create, or at least have the potential to create, a certain sense of confusion about their knighthood and masculinity. They pose different kinds of threats to knights as men, as their abilities to identify themselves as men; men, which are the very beholders of privileges of patriarchal society. This suggests that the feminine in Malory embodies and characterizes singular system of values that challenges the chivalric ethos. In

other words, the presence of women in the chivalric equation poses a threat “to the masculine *status quo*” (Fisher 152) in which men are the beholders of power and women are only subservient. The greatest failure for Arthur is not the tragedy of great lovers, for example, or even the loss of his queen, but the destruction of the knightly brotherhood of the Round Table. Malory describes Arthur lamenting the loss of his knights. He says, “And therefore . . . wyte you well, my harte was never so hevvy as hit ys now. And more more I am sorryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I might have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company” (685). And what Malory does not realize is that the very patriarchal foundations that create this brotherhood of chivalry and knighthood, especially based on the Oath, is what caused the Round Table’s downfall.

#### Gender Instability and the Feminine:

If the feminine destabilizes gender roles, and by extension puts into question chivalric and knightly masculine ideologies, it on the other hand can also reverse them, by taking masculine positions of power. The feminine finds itself taking the place of the masculine and enjoying the same benefits associated with such a position, because they place the masculine in a position of the desired object, and themselves in that of the desiring subject. This is seen in three episodes: one involves Nymue; the second, Morgan le Fay and her desires; and the third, the huntress.

Among the roles associated with women, many of them are negative, such as the evil witch or the temptress, like Eve. However, Maureen Fries states that there are in fact three feminine figures that contest these negative images: the female hero, the heroine and the counter-hero. Each of these figures plays an important role in Arthurian literature, especially in Malory, for they not only influence the course of the story, or the knight's behavior, but also they are in their own right fully independent. The most interesting figure among these three, for the purposes of this discussion, is that of the female hero. Whereas Fries defines the heroine as "recognizable by her performance of a traditionally identified, female sex-role," the female hero possesses the opposite values. These women

assume the usual male role of exploring the unknown beyond their assigned place in society; and [they] reject to various degrees the usual female role of preserving order (principally by forgoing adventure to stay at home). The adventurous path [they] choose require the males who surround them to fill subordinate, non-protagonist roles in their stories. (60)

This definition of the female hero, in fact, adheres to Joseph Campbell's definition of the (male) hero. He writes that the hero is one "who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the ... primary springs of human life and thought" (20). This type of heroism is often associated with the masculine. In this case, it is also associated with the feminine.

This feminine heroism appears with Nymue, whom Kenneth Hodges views as "a chivalric figure" capable of "redefin[ing] crucial elements of political and romantic chivalry, demonstrating that women can participate in chivalry as agents instead of objects" (78). There are two important scenes that cast her in the role of the chivalric knight: first, the moment she takes Excalibur from Accolon and gives it

back to Arthur during their battle; and second, when she marries Pelleas. In the scene of battle between Arthur and Accolon, Excalibur stands as the symbol for kingship. Arthur's first sword is the one he takes from the stone, the one that proves his claim to the throne. This is to say, the battle between him and Accolon is one for the position of kingship: Arthur is fighting to save his knights from prison and to return to his rightful position on the throne; Accolon is fighting out of treason and under the auspices of Morgan le Fay, who promised him a position on the throne. As I had mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Arthur's kingship, and in this instance his sword, establishes him as a man/king/knight who is able to hold together a heteronormative community. If Arthur loses the battle, he also loses the sword and his right to his masculine/kingly/knightly title and identity. However, before Arthur can lose this battle, Nymue steps in and allows him to take back possession of the real sword (Malory 85). Nymue intervenes not because she is asked for her help, but because she acts as an equal agent of good power against Morgan le Fay's evil one, and reverses the balance of power between Arthur and Accolon. As Hodges explains, "[w]hen [Nymue] intervenes to give Arthur the true Excalibur, she establishes that the rules of kingship will depend on a sense of justice based not merely on technicalities but on larger circumstances and motive" (79). This scene also reflects Arthur's masculinity. The symbolism of the sword being a phallic one, as I will further explain in chapter two, Arthur cannot win the battle as long as Excalibur is in the hands of Accolon. Accolon is the one in possession of masculine power and it is not until Nymue intervenes and reverses the power roles between

Accolon and Arthur that Arthur becomes the one in possession of his masculinity, and thus of his power and right to the throne.

Furthermore, Nymue's active participation in the chivalric ethos casts her in the role of the hero. That is, she is able to save herself without requiring a knight's chivalric help to do so, especially when Merlin restlessly and sexually pursues her. As Hodges writes, Merlin is "clearly violating the code of chivalry Arthur has just announced" (83) by forcing himself on a woman who refuses his advances. And because the Oath, which states to "never to enforce [women], upon payne of dethe" (75), is violated by Merlin, Nymue's entombment of Merlin cannot be perceived negatively. By breaking the code of the Oath, by trying to enforce a woman, Merlin is punished by death. Not only does Nymue save and protect herself as any knight would have done for her, she also applies the Oath when justice is lacking. However, according to Fries, Nymue is not a hero but instead acts as a "counter-hero," because she "deprives the male Arthurians of their counselor and reveals her own cunning ambition" (71). Fries defines the counter-hero as one who

possesses the hero's superior power of action without possessing his or her adherence to the dominant culture or capability of renewing its values. While the hero proper transcends yet respects the norms of the patriarchy, the counter-hero violates them in some way. (61)

While she sees Nymue as violating values posed by chivalric and knightly ideals, I contest that argument. Nymue executes exactly what the Oath demands when a man tries to force himself on a woman. Furthermore, she helps Arthur to establish his throne, much like his knights do. Fries herself also admits that Nymue "becomes the devoted and influential friend of Arthurian society" (71) by saving Arthur from Morgan's magic mantle, reversing the love relation in which Pelleas and Ettarde

were caught, and by later marrying Pelleas, protecting him all his life, and allowing him to become a knight of the Round Table. Nymue also acts as protector of Guenevere's innocence when charges of murder are placed against her. Fries writes about the female hero, "if completely successful, female (like male) heroes return to their original societies with the[ir] prized gifts" (60). Indeed, Nymue defeats a lusty wizard, saves Arthur, and wins a husband. As Hodges writes, her chivalric "career ... is suitable for a knight. Her courtship thus emphasizes her right and ability to act as a chivalric agent" (90). Hence, Nymue is a hero in her own right. But what's more, she indeed reverses gender roles and becomes actively chivalric.

Another instance where the feminine takes on values of the masculine is the scene in which Morgan le Fay holds Lancelot prisoner in her castle. This scene not only reverses the roles of masculine/feminine binaries, but it does so to the point that the masculine is feminized. Throughout the entire story, Malory portrays Morgan as the main evil and enemy of the realm, of good knights and of Arthur. He gives her no real purpose or motivations as to why she is the enemy. The sole explanation is that she is a witch. There are various mentions of her practicing her magic arts, such as enchanting Elaine of Corbyn out of jealousy, or learning her craft in a convent. But above all, Malory portrays her as evil because she strongly exudes sexual desire.

At the beginning of Arthur's story, Morgan is still seen as "a fayre lady as ony might be" (30). In Malory, the word "fayre" takes on a quite important connotation for it seems to be closely associated with everything that is good, beautiful and in accordance with knightly and chivalric ethos. Anything or anyone who acts as help to Arthur's realm, knights or ideals is called "fayre." All the good

damsels are “fayre,” for example. Even the lake from which Arthur takes his sword is “a fayre watir” (35). Vinaver, in his edition of Malory’s *Morte*, explains in his glossary that the word “fayre” can mean many things among which “courteous,” “gentle,” and “kind” are common (790). Furthermore, the OED defines “fayre” as an adjective which “[i]n all the older senses is merely used antithetically with *foul*” (def. A). The dictionary also further defines it as “beautiful” and “almost exclusively of women” (def.I.1a) or “applied to women, as expressing the quality of their sex” (def.1b). Hence, Morgan le Fay is described as “fayre” in the beginning because she has not yet done anything that goes against women’s supposed conduct. It is only when she begins to be shown being under no man’s authority that she starts to be seen as evil.

Maureen Fries describes Morgan le Fay as a “counter-hero,” one who “possesses the hero’s superior power of action without possessing his or her adherence to the dominant culture or capability of renewing its values” (61). In other words, Morgan’s actions are capable of violating the established rules and codes of conduct. Even her beauty “does not ... complete the hero’s valor [...] ... Rather, it often threatens to destroy him, because of her refusal of the usual female role” (Fries 61). The counter-hero is a nurturer and a destroyer. Morgan le Fay wants to destroy Arthur and yet at the end, she is the one who takes him to Avalon to be healed. As Joseph Campbell writes, this type of feminine figure, the nurturer/destroyer, stems from primary archetypal figures of the “mother of life” and “at the same time mother of death,” and comes in a “multitude of guises” (302-303). Morgan le Fay’s power, and at the same time one that is threatening, is her open sexuality. She is married but

has multiple lovers. And above all, she desires Lancelot, the best and most worshipful knight of the realm. She and three other unnamed queens enchant Lancelot and imprison him in her castle where he awakens from the spell. And they give him a final option: to “chose one of us, whyche that thou wolte have to thy peramour, other ellys to dye in this preson” (152). Lancelot refuses of course, but he is unable to save himself, nor act on his oath. He becomes the damsel in distress. Roles are reversed and Lancelot finds himself in an object position. And, according to the normative values available in the *Morte's* culture, the feminine is the desirable object, passive and helpless. His refusal earns him a night in the dungeons. However, another lady comes to save him. She gives him back his masculinity by providing his “armoure, ... horse, shelde and spere” (153). In both cases, he is either held captive by women, or saved by them. The roles are reversed: the passive and helpless character is Lancelot, and the active and desiring subject is Morgan. In this case, Lancelot is feminized.

Similarly, Morgan le Fay desires the wounded Sir Alysauindir. His lady asks for Morgan's help in healing him, which she accepts but on one condition. She is to take Alysauindir to her castle, and makes him promise “by youre knyghthode that this twelve-monthe and a day ye shall nat passe the compace of this castell, and ye shall lyghtly be hole” (395). A damsel later informs Alysauindir that Morgan le Fay extracted this promise of him so she can “kepyth [him] here for none other entente but for to do hir pleasure whan hit lykyth hir” (395). In this sense, Morgan's lusty nature and desires reverse gender roles. She is acting exactly as Uther, Arthur, Merlin, and countless other men have acted towards those they desired. But because

she is a woman, and as such should only perform as the desired object, she is seen as an evil character, and her lusty nature is a threat to knights who can no longer perform their duties

Another episode, in which Lancelot is also placed in a position where gender roles are reversed, involves a huntress. Malory writes,

So at that tyme there was a lady that dwelled in that foreyste, and she was a grete hunteresse, and dayly she used to hunte. And ever she bare her bowghe with her, and no men wente never with her, but allwayes women, and they were all shooters and cowed well kylled a dere at the stalke and at the treste. And they dayly beare bowys, arowis, hornys and wood-knyves, and many good doggis they had, bothe for the strenge and for a bate. (643)

If one were to take out any indications of the feminine, and leave in all the rest, one would immediately assume, according to the highly masculine context of Malory's work, that the character he is describing is indeed masculine. The character has all the shows of strength and talent, not to mention all the right weapons. However, this he, is a she, and an active she who is looking for a prey. And, unintentionally, Lancelot becomes the prey:

And so hit happened that that hynde cam to the same welle thereas sir Launcelot was by that welle slepyng and slumberyng. ... Ryght so cam that lady, the hunteres, that knew by her dogges that the hynde was at the soyle by that welle, ... And anone as she had aspyed hym she put a brode arrow in her bowe and shot at the hynde, and so she overshotte thy hynde, and so by myssefortune the arrow smote sir Launcelot in the thycke of the buttoke over the barbys. (643)

Lancelot is outraged that a woman wounds him so, especially in his buttocks as it will forbid him to properly engage in manly activities: sit on a horse to joust against other knights and prove his worth. In fact, sitting on a horse to fight or joust is important to knights in Malory, as it is a matter of honor and prowess. Sir Lamorak, in an earlier episode, at the tournament of Surluse, exclaims to his fellow knights:

Bretherne, ye ought to be ashamed to falle so of your horsis! What is a knyght byt whan he is on horsebacke? For I sette nat by a knyght whan he is on foote, for all batayles on foote ar but pyllours in batayles, for there sholde no knyght fyghte on foote but yf hit were for treson or ellys he were dryvyn by forse to fyght on foote. Therefore, bretherne, sytte faste in your sadyls, or ellys fyght never more afore me! (408)

Hence, because of the role reversal Lancelot cannot act on his Oath or prove his worth as a knight.

All the knights in Malory's *Morte* are pushed to seek adventures and to prove themselves and their worth as knightly members of a chivalric order. But when they do so, the situation is seldom positive, and this aspect of knighthood and chivalry becomes most destructive, for they may find themselves in positions where they are no longer allowed to perform their knighthood/masculinity. Not only does the Oath heavily rely on the feminine, but also the feminine itself destabilizes gender notions and ideals. The feminine becomes the center of attention; present everywhere, in every form.

## Chapter 2

### The Rhetoric of Enchantment and the Feminine

While knighthood, chivalry, and masculine brotherhood are important in Malory, magic also plays a central and prominent role. Magic is and has always been part of Arthurian romances, and not only because Merlin is the first and most popular wizard in Malory's *Morte* and Arthurian literature in general, but because magic is closely associated with gender, and especially with the repressed. Magic is highly polarised: it is good or evil, masculine or feminine. Often, if it is masculine, it takes the form of foretelling or prophecy. Merlin tells Arthur things about his own future, of his kingdom and Merlin's own end. If it is feminine, it is defined as crafty: magic potions, sorcery and shapeshifting are used to trick or imprison knights for various reasons. Magical elements have an impact on the plot of the story, the characters, their choices, and their ends, and Malory's *Morte* is full of them. They almost always influence knights as the magic used sometimes works, and sometimes does not. And magic in association with women has the power to destabilize gender ideals, to create confusion, and to put a knight's actions and behaviour into question. The powerful association of magic with women acts as a means the repressed feminine is able to use to express itself in a world where the masculine is, above all, prioritised.

There is a multitude of magical objects being dispersed, potions being given, and happenings described as "marvellous" or "wondrous," that take place. These elements act as literary devices, tropes in which the magical is used as part of the plot to test, destroy or protect the knights. "When considered in all its various forms," writes Michelle Sweeney, "magic is one of the few properties that appear in romances with relative consistency throughout the medieval period" (16). More

precisely, the world of romance is, in McCarthy's terms, "a world we recognize at once, a world of mystery and unexplained meanings" (6), especially when it is closely associated with the magical. Magic, an element in itself that has very little explanation is in fact what creates meaning in Malory. For magic is associated with women, and women are located in the subtext of the plot, silenced and often have very little choice in their dealings in a man's world. And being associated with magic, women are provided a means of power that can affect change. This aspect is its very appeal. It provides the power of freedom from social restraints such as class, religion, gender, or politics, for example. And because of this aspect, magic has powerful influence.

Magic certainly complicates matters for, often, it does not have any obvious explanation or significance as to why a certain object provides magical protection or help, for example. What is more interesting is that "an author's use of magic and fantasy provides a safe space within the text, a world far away or long ago, enabling the exploration of issues which might otherwise prove difficult or destructive in a society" (Sweeney 23). This safe space is where the feminine is allowed to operate, through the magical. In fact, Rosemary Jackson argues that magic in literature, "does not reside in escapism but in its ability to subvert authority and express values outside tacitly accepted norms" (27). One, however, has to be careful with such a suggestion when it comes to Malory's *Morte*. I am not implying that Malory is using magic purposefully for this end, i.e. to explore subversive gender ideas. However, by associating magic almost exclusively with the feminine, as he does in his text, and by setting it in this safe space of the fantastical and far away realm, Malory's text is

certainly opening doors for subversive ideas. The feminine is located at the margins of chivalric ideology but is nevertheless needed to help the chivalric enterprise, as was shown in the first chapter.

Furthermore, men have clearly defined roles in Arthurian literature, and in Malory more specifically. In comparison, there are relatively few roles for women. And those that are available provide “vague and contrapuntal” positions (Fries 59). Many of the stereotypes associated with women in Arthurian literature come from pre-established conceptions of the feminine that date back to the Roman times often predating Christian thought. However, the Church also helped in subordinating women by ascribing their faults of the first sinful woman, Eve. Maureen Fries explains:

The church added to its [Christian] heritage in elaborating upon the supposed universal faults of the daughters of Eve. To all women, philosophers, theologians, moral writers, and even romances ascribed the sins of Adam’s partner: they were said to be weak, vain, lustful, and needful of the guidance and headship of men, who were supposed to curb their pride and insubordination in order to make them pure, humble, and submissive. (59)

By the late Middle Ages these negative stereotypes of women were so widely spread that magic, especially demonic magic, quickly became associated with the feminine. Among Malory’s contemporaries were writers Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger who wrote the highly misogynistic and highly popular work, *Malleus Maleficarum* otherwise known as *The Witch Hammer*, which explained how to recognize, expose and torture a witch in order for her to admit she is having dealings with demons or the Devil. In this text, Kramer and Sprenger define women as breeders of “all wickedness,” “feebler both in mind and body,” and “intellectually like children” (44). And they add that “[a]ll witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women

insatiable” (47). But, because woman is seen in terms of binary oppositions of good and evil, Kramer and Sprenger are careful to state that not all women are evil. Some of them are good because “they have brought beatitude to men, and have saved nations, lands, and cities” (43). Hence, based on these binaries, woman is located at one extreme or the other, as either entirely evil or entirely good. There is no middle ground or ambiguity. In fact, Kramer and Sprenger state that a woman:

knows no moderation of goodness or vice; and when they exceed the bounds of their condition they reach the greatest heights and the lowest depths of goodness and vice. When they are governed by a good spirit, they are more excellent in virtue; but when they are governed by evil spirit, they indulge in the worst possible vices. (42)

These two separate polar oppositions of women are based on an older binary, created by Christian ideology: Mary, the pure virgin, and Eve, the evil temptress, cause of men’s downfall. This is what Barbara Walker, and many others, calls the “Virgin/Whore Dichotomy” (606). This polarization exists throughout the *Morte* “where Morgan is characterized as powerful, vicious, and unscrupulous, and the Lady of the Lake is Arthur’s benefactress” (MacCurdy 13). Following the same pattern, good women are “fayre” and evil women are “foul,” or “fayre” if they still have not shown their evil nature, like Morgan le Fay at the beginning of the *Morte*. The magical powers that are present to help patriarchal ideals are considered good and hence incorporated into the chivalric plot, whereas the magical powers that are beyond any patriarchal or masculine control are seen as destructive and “bad”, and thus have to be pushed aside or destroyed.

Before one can begin to look at magic in association with women in Malory’s *Morte*, a brief look at how magic is perceived in the Middle Ages will help

understand how it is perceived in terms of binaries of good and evil. Magic is fundamentally a frightening occurrence because it has no obvious explanation as to its workings. Richard Kieckhefer, in his sociological study, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, compares magic to a “crossroads” between religion and science (1). It is evil, or “demonic” when it invokes evil spirits and good, or “natural” when it “exploits ‘occult’ powers within nature” (1). But it is seldom easy to recognize demonic from natural magic. Is an herbal concoction accompanied by a small prayer natural or demonic magic? Is it religion or is it science? Is it good or is it evil? Kieckhefer defines magic by saying that natural magic was a part of science, one that “dealt with ‘occult virtues’ (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from God and towards demons for their help in human affairs” (9). This seems to happen in Malory, in terms of Morgan le Fay and Merlin’s magic. Merlin is often seen to be an extension of God’s power and will, however Morgan learns her dark magic while being in a convent. I will first look at Merlin’s use of the magical in order to better illustrate Morgan’s.

When the text of the *Morte* opens, the first act of magic the readers observe is that of Merlin transforming Uther to look “lyke the duke [Igraine’s] husdand, Ulfyus ... lyke syre Brastias, a knyghte of the dukes, and I [Merlin] ... lyke a knyghte that hyghte syr Jordanus, a knyghte of the dukes” (4). And it all happens for two selfish reasons: Uther wants Igraine in his bed, and Merlin, in order to fulfill a prophecy, wants the child who will result from their union. Magic, here, does not have any of the negative connotations it will later have, for it is still in Merlin’s use.

In other terms, when it comes to the magical Merlin seems to be seen as a good character, and not as someone who is crafting and manipulating events to his own ends, through magical means.

Furthermore, his magical and prophesying abilities are rarely seen as different or separated from the miraculous and the divine. In fact, Merlin often refers to magical events happening as God's will. The text likewise seems to suggest that Merlin's magic is an extension of God's will, or at least as going hand in hand with the religious. When Merlin needs to work his magic to make Uther speak before his death, he says, "There nys none other remedye ... but God wil have His wille. But loke ye al barons be bifore kynge Uther to-morne, and God and I shalle make hym speke" (7). Malory seems to suggest that Merlin and God are at the same level in that both work with the divine. Another episode reflecting Merlin as close to the divine is when he goes to see the Archbishop of Canterbury "and counceille[s] hym to sende for all the lordes of the reame ... that they shold to London come by Cristmas upon payne of cursynge" (7). The Archbishop, a character in a position of religious power, listens to Merlin, the wizard, as if his magical presence were not threatening in any way. On the contrary, the text suggests that Merlin's wizardry is an extension of God's divine power, for the Archbishop takes Merlin's words very seriously and executes them without any opposition.

Even the sword in the stone, which is a secular magical object designated to choose the rightful king, is linked to God's will. Merlin makes it clear when he says to the crowd of lords and barons, "doubte not God will make hym knowen ... that shold wyne the swerd" (8). Merlin warns Arthur not to "fyghte ... with the swerde

that [he] had by miracle” (12). The use of the term “miracle” links the sword to its divine appropriation, and by extension, to Merlin’s divine magical power. In addition, Merlin’s magic is by no means harmful to the knightly and chivalric ethos of Arthur’s realm. In fact, soon after Arthur is put on the throne, he demands that all his knights respect Merlin for his help. He says, “Ye knowe wel that he [Merlin] hath done moche for me, and he knoweth many thynges. And whan he is afore you I wold that ye prayd hym hertely of his best avyse” (13).

Arthur mentions that Merlin “knoweth many thynges.” There is no particular reference to what Merlin knows, but it is suggested that his knowledge is prophetic and seemingly divine. This appears when Arthur mistakenly sleeps with his half-sister Morgause, and later has a dream-vision in which he sees some beastly creatures. He talks about it to Merlin, and Merlin warns him that this dream explains that “ye have done a thyng late that God ys displesed with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of your realme” (29). The mention of God being very displeased with Arthur here again suggests that Merlin is seen as a prophet figure, an extension of God’s power, words, and will.

Merlin’s magic operates in the realm of the positive, the divine and the miraculous. There is no mention whether his magic is good or evil. There is not even any questioning of Merlin being good or evil, even though he manipulates many characters through the use of prophecies and magic. It is only when magic begins to appear in the hands of female characters that it starts to take on the binary aspects of good and evil. The very first mention of magic associated with the feminine is

negative. This happens when some of the lords get angry with Merlin for prophesising Arthur's rule over the lands. Malory writes, "some of the knights had merveyl of Merlyns words and demed well that it shold be as he said, and som of hem lough hym to scorne, as kyng Lot, and no other called hym a wytche" (12). They accuse him of being a witch, a term the OED defines as "[a] female magician, sorceress;" and in later use as "a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their co-operation to perform supernatural acts" (def 1a). However, Merlin here is never overtly accused of evil doing, and this accusation only happens because some knights and lords are unhappy about his *political* choice. Merlin is simply trying to convince these lords and knights that Arthur is the royal heir, the one whose right to the throne is legally inherited, and that no other man can make that claim. It is not a matter of whether Merlin is bewitching them or controlling them by the means of the magical, as women are often accused of doing. While this negative association of magic and witchcraft is related to Merlin, it is even more so when it comes to the feminine.

While this negative association of magic and witchcraft is related to Merlin in this last instance shown above, it is unquestionably and strongly associated with the feminine. Malory describes Morgan le Fay as having learnt her magical arts or "nygromancye" in a nunnery, a place devoted to religion. He writes, "And the thyrd syster, Morgan le Fey, was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (5). Malory specifically chooses the word "nygromancye" to designate Morgan le Fay's evilness. The Middle English Dictionary (MED) defines "nigromaunci" as "sorcery, witchcraft, black magic,

occult art.” And Sweeney suggests that “Necromancy ... is most often the term employed to denote actions explicitly reliant on the conjuring of demons and invocations to the Devil”(31). But how can one learn evil magic in a holy and religious place such as a nunnery? There is one possible explanation, and it assumes that the text is suggesting that Morgan le Fay must have learnt something akin to a *perversion* of religion instead of good religious practices. Did Malory pervert Morgan le Fay because she is a woman? Or is it because Morgan bears the name of “le Fay,” the fairy, that she is instinctively associated with the dark side of magic? Malory specifically writes that she has learned “so moche” that she became a great clerk of necromancy. After all Merlin is also mentioned to know “many thynges” (13) but his extensive knowledge is not illustrated as being negative, as I have showed above, contrary to Morgan le Fay’s. This seems to suggest that if Morgan le Fay had learnt only what a woman was supposed to learn as a woman, she would not have become a practitioner of evil magic. Clearly, then, Malory’s Morgan is meant to be perceived and interpreted as evil. In fact, Morgan le Fay was not so evil in the earlier Arthurian texts. Henry Morgan explains in his article on “The Role of Morgan le Fay in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*” that in Malory’s sources, Morgan le Fay had the power of healing and prophecy. He writes,

The most striking fact about Malory’s treatment of Morgan le Fay is that he has either removed or depressed considerably two of the most common traditions which throughout the Arthurian romance materials are associated with Morgan le Fay: the healing tradition and the power of prophecy. In the *Morte Darthur*, Morgan uses her healing ability only twice, once in connection with Alexander the Orphan and once at the final departure of Arthur to Avalon, and the prophetic power is removed from her altogether. (152)

Morgan le Fay is described as using her healing powers to, first, help Alysaunder, whom I mentioned in chapter one, and second, to help Arthur in the end of his life. However, Malory undermines Morgan le Fay's healing magic by making her aggressively sexual. She helps Alysaunder because she wants him "to do hir pleasure whan hit lykyth hir" (395). And the last episode, in which she takes Arthur in order to heal him, is what Henry Morgan terms as "inexplicable," for it rather seems misplaced in the whole Morgan-Arthur-hate cycle. How can a woman, through the entire plot, take every measure and effort to desperately try to kill Arthur suddenly decide to want to take him to heal on the island of Avalon? It makes no sense at all. This is rather residual from her earlier role in earlier Arthurian texts, in which she is more the benefactress than the evil destructive character.

#### Magic and Female Power as Discourse of the Repressed

Like shown in the previous chapter, the feminine lies at the basis of the Oath and of the mechanics of chivalry and knighthood. It also lies at the basis of every knight's fate and providence, in terms of the magical. As women instigate knightly duties, and thus enable the conditions for knightly and chivalric activity, magic instigates the beginning of knightly adventure at Arthur's wedding feast. This takes place under the form of a white hart and brachet followed by a maiden, which suddenly appear to disturb the feast. This scene initiates "the cycles of quest for the Round Table" (Heng 97) for it sets the example every knight must take henceforth. The magical appears when, just moments before the arrival of the maiden, Merlin prophesies this instance. Malory writes, "Merlion wente to all knyghtes of the

Rounde Table and bade hem sitte style, ‘that none of you remeve, for ye shall se a straunge and a mervailous adventure’” (63). Then as soon as these words are said, the two creatures appear and the lady behind them. Soon, a “knyght rydyng all armed on a grete horse, and toke the lady away with forse with hym, and ever she cryed and made grete dole” (63). When Arthur is glad this lady is gone, Merlin chastises him and obliges him to do his duty explaining: “ye may nat leve hit so, thys adventure, so lyghtly, for thes adventures muste be brought to an ende, other ellis hit woll be disworshyp to you and to youre feste” (63). It is true it is Merlin who chastises Arthur and pushes him to send his knights to follow the lady. However, Malory specifically chooses a woman as a character to be taken away by force, helpless. It could have been a child, or some other character. But, as I showed in the first chapter, the chivalric Oath *needs* this particular trope of the damsel-in-distress, for it states that knights must always help women in need, and by extension, it also states that women are always helpless. Hence, the magical and the feminine set forth the series of events and adventures the knights must undertake.

Furthermore, having women predominantly introducing magic creates anxiety in the text. Having the power to produce change, or having the power to control a situation, a person or one’s own body reveals a fear patriarchy has that women might take over men’s power. This is especially true when it comes to taking over sexual power. Morgan Le Fay is described as evil throughout the *Morte* primarily because she is overtly sexual and goes after the knights she desires, as I have already demonstrated.

Elaine of Corbyn also goes after what she desires and uses magic, however, because the outcome is necessary to the plot, i.e. Galahad is the pure knight that must be born out of Lancelot the most worshipful knight, Malory does not condemn her. However, he does not condemn her because magic here is used primarily as a means of control over the female body, and also, because Elaine does not directly make use of it, that is, she is not the one who asks for the potion to be made in order to trick Lancelot. Elaine's father, the king of Corbyn, is the one that does so, and asks a witch, dame Brusen, "one of the grettyst enchaunters that was that tyme in the worlde" (479), to make a magic potion for his daughter to drink. And because "sir Launcelot lovyth no lady in the worlde but all only quene Gwennyver [dame Brusen] shall make hym to lye with youre [Corbyn's] doughter, and he shall nat wyte but that he lyeth by quene Gwennyver" (479). In this sense, Elaine's body is being controlled through the use of the magical. "The link between magic and power over an individual is tied in many ways to the link between control over female sexuality and the need to ensure ... pure bloodlines," writes Sweeney (27). Indeed, she explains:

it is the romances and other such forms of literature with their preoccupation with women and magic, which contributed to the hysteria concerning female power over men, the birthing process, and the sexual perversions attributed to heretics in the later medieval period. (27)

This implies that there is an underlying anxiety that men have about women in their ability to sexually enchant, charm, bewitch them, and make these men unable to fight what they perceive as this specifically, and perhaps inherently, feminine "magical" power. What is truly destabilizing, however, especially in Malory, is that this seemingly magical femininity is capable of taking a perfectly masculine and

phallic symbol, such as a sword, and symbolically transform it into a feminine element. The effect becomes, in Freudian terms, quite uncanny.

### Magical Objects and Gender

The "unheimlich" or translated in English as the "uncanny" is an ambivalent word with an unclear definition. A literal translation of the uncanny or the "unheimlich" would be the "unhomely." Freud explains that the "unheimlich" or the "unhomely" is "the opposite of 'heimlich' [homely]... the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known or familiar" (931). However, the word "unhomely" or "unheimlich" also contain the words "homely" or "heimlich" within it. In his work, Freud gives a series of definitions of his "unheimlich" among which I will retain two for the purpose of my thesis. First, he mentions briefly that magic is called "The *heimlich* art" (933), and second, he states that "the word 'heimlich' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (933). Quite significantly, the English word "canny" is defined by the OED as "comfortable, pleasant, cosy" (def.7b) and "[s]upernaturally wise, endowed with occult or magical power" (def.4). Thus the uncanny is both a representation of what is familiar and the unfamiliar. This is the terrifying aspect of the uncanny, for as it is familiar, cosy and known, it changes meaning and becomes unknown, unfamiliar, hidden, and cannot be explained.

The sword, in Malory, is perhaps the most important object in a knight's life and career. It is a purely masculine possession to which a knight relates, and feels comfortable handling. The sword defines the knight, exhibits his masculinity and empowers him. Without his armour, for example, a knight is not always recognized as masculine, nor is he recognized as a knight, however, his sword will always ultimately restore any masculinity that has the potential to be lost, for it is inherently associated with the phallic symbol of masculinity. After all, Lancelot never visits Guenevere's bedroom without a sword in hand. Malory seems to be telling his readers, on a subtextual level, that Arthur is destined to draw this sword because he is the one powerful ruler who will be able to install the Oath, knightly rules and behaviours on which the concept of gender is based, as I have previously shown in chapter one. Hence to do such a thing, the king must be at the height of his masculinity; one capable of anchoring chivalric and knightly duties, as a true man should. Malory states in his work that in order to provide proof that Arthur is the rightful king to the throne of Uther, he must draw the sword from the stone. As McCarthy writes, "evidence is needed not only to prove his claim, but to show that a claim exists, and the sword in the stone provides the evidence" (7). "Why it should," he adds "we are never told, for there is no logical link between drawing swords from stones and inheriting royal titles" (7). While I agree with McCarthy that evidence must be shown for Arthur to become king, it is certainly not done arbitrarily or without a "logical link." Not only does a sword provide physical power or protection to its beholder, but also it defines gender. This link is illustrated when young Arthur refuses to leave Sir Kay without a sword, at the jousting match at the beginning of

the story. “I will ryde to the chircheyard and take the swerd with me that stycketh in the stone, for my broder sir Kay shal not be without a swerd this day,” says Arthur (8). A knight’s worth seems to be judged by his strength in battle. This is set forth at the beginning when Malory writes, “alweyes kynge Arthur on horsback leyd on with a swerd and dyd merveillous dedes of armes, that many of the kynges had grete joye of his dedes and hardynesse” (12). However, Arthur’s sword from the stone does not hold in battle and breaks soon after. Malory knows that he cannot leave Arthur too long without a sword, for it is both the symbol of his might, kingly position and masculinity, and so he introduces the Lady of the Lake, the new beholder of the sword. However, this second—not to mention magical—sword, Excalibur, is acquired by and restored to a woman, and because of this, its meaning and symbolism begins to alter.

When Arthur’s first sword breaks, Merlin takes him to see the Lady of the Lake. But a moment before Arthur knows where they are going, the first thing he tells Merlin after his long and tenuous fight with Pellinore is, “I have no swerde” (35). Clearly, this suggests that a knight cannot stay without a sword for too long. And sure enough, Merlin takes Arthur to get another one. This time, the sword comes from a lady’s hand. I had explained in the first chapter that “fayre” takes on different connotations but that are most commonly associated with the beautiful and the feminine. And everything that takes on the adjective “fayre” seems to be in agreement with Arthur’s desires. The Lady of the Lake is “fayre,” the lake from which Arthur takes his sword is “a fayre watir” (35). Even the sword, Excalibur, is called a “fayre swerde” (35). The word “fayre,” according to the OED, is associated

with the feminine, or at least is “applied to women, as expressing the quality of their sex,” as I have explained in chapter one. With this definition in mind, the sword then takes on the qualifications of “beautiful,” an adjective which, in Malory, seems to be mostly attributed to the feminine. And having the sword given by a “fayre” lady, from “fayre watir,” almost entirely feminizes its symbolism. The Lady even lives in a “fayre paleyce” (35). Furthermore, Malory makes sure to clarify to whom the sword really belongs. The Lady says, “Sir Arthur ... that swerde ys myne” (35). And she agrees to give the sword to Arthur only in exchange of a gift she will later claim. At the end of Arthur’s reign, when he is nearing his own death, the sword is returned to the lake, where, Malory tells his readers, it belongs. There is even a sense of urgency that the sword is returned to the Lady. Arthur, who orders sir Bedwere to return the sword, chastises him for having failed to do so twice: “A, traytour unto me and untrew, ... now hast thou betrayed me twice” (715). He talks about betrayal for this failure, a word often used in terms of the knightly Oath. Then “there cam an arme and an honed above the water, and toke hit, and shoke hit thryse and braundysshed, and than vanysshed with the swerde into the watir” (716). With this last act, the sword loses its phallic symbol and becomes feminized as it retreats in the “fayre watir,” and ultimately the familiar becomes unfamiliar, in other words, uncanny.

This, however, raises another question. There are multiple magical objects that are distributed throughout the entire *Morte*, but as soon as they are mentioned, they no longer seem useful. Is it because these objects are provided by the feminine that they become useless? Helen Cooper, in her article “Magic that Does Not Work,”

suggests that magic, more precisely magical objects are “introduced with all the emphasis appropriate to [them], and then, when the critical moment arrives, [they] fail to work” (131). This is particularly true in terms of the scabbard, which I will discuss for the purpose of this present study. Merlin specifically mentions that the scabbard is what will protect Arthur from shedding his blood. However, when the time comes to use it, Arthur never does. The scabbard is later thrown away into a lake, without any hope of recovering it. This event seems quite odd, in that the use of the scabbard could have saved Arthur quite a lot of trouble from his sister Morgan le Fay, who had stolen it to give it to Accolon. I had mentioned in chapter one, that Nymue causes Arthur to finally win the battle against Accolon and that without her aid, Arthur could not have done so. This still stands true, however, in this case, the magical, or rather lack thereof, is quite significant. Useless magic, as Cooper further suggests, “has little to do with plot” and everything to do with psychology (134). This is to say, the magical object that is unused serves to test the character’s heroism, in this case Arthur’s, his strength and his ability to save himself without any external magical help. Cooper suggests that “the magic that fails to work opens the way towards the realization of human ideals” (135). In other words, it influences Arthur’s behavior and course of actions, and allows the reader to compare him to Accolon in terms of prowess and knightliness in battle. In this sense, Arthur fights “against supernatural odds” (Cooper 138)—for Accolon has both the scabbard and the magical sword Excalibur—and still wins against his enemy. Here, it can be said then, that the feminine, that is, the Lady of the Lake, which had provided the

magical scabbard in an episode prior to this above mentioned, is the literary trope used in order to test the king's knightly valor and prowess.

Ultimately, the fascinating aspect of magic is that it provides a means the feminine is able to use to express her desires or test a knight's prowess. Malory does not portray magic as a positive element when associated with women, unless it is there to serve the patriarchal plot, and even neutralises Morgan le Fay's power of healing and prophecy. However, the feminine is still able to surface through the use of magic and destabilize pre-established masculine symbolisms, such as the sword.

## Chapter 3

### The Feminine as Unity or Disunity?

In general, it is certainly not an easy task to decide whether Malory's *Morte Darthur* is a unified piece of work. Among critics, views are manifold. On the one hand, critics, such as Vinaver, view the text as separate tales, "a series of self-contained stories" (viii) that are not specifically related to one another. On the other hand, critics such as Charles Moorman, R.M. Lumiansky and Thomas C. Rumble argue that the work as a whole can be considered cohesive because themes are consistent and characters are developed throughout the entire book, even though many die, completely disappear or suddenly reappear at random moments. Either way, there is no easy or real answer, and I will not try to convey one. For the purpose of this study, however, one thing is certain: the feminine does have a place in this massive work that is the *Morte Darthur*, and it acts as both unity and disunity. It is unity because it is located at the heart of the chivalric enterprise, and regulates heteronormativity. It is disunity because it can break apart this very heteronormativity and has the ability to destabilize preconceived notions of knighthood, chivalry and gender. It acts on two levels: the social level of the story, as well as the narrative level of the text.

Underneath the very masculine and knightly tone of the text, there is definitely a subtler undercurrent that resides "within surface textuality" (Heng 97), and which is distinctively feminine. This is the voice that produces both unity and disunity, as it is able to "encompass and symbolically fix the entire realm of human possibility –good and evil, success and failure, protection or destruction" (98) and, as Catherine LaFarge suggests, it "is located as both the inner and the utterly outside" (264). However, what creates unity is also the cause for "[t]he disruptive

gestures and energies, intrusions and interruptions” that are located in the subtext (Heng 97). In this sense, then, the feminine stands in positions where even if it provides unity, it mostly provokes disorder.

One of the first moments in which the feminine creates, at the same time unity and disunity concerns the Oath. Malory incorporates specific guidelines to knightly conduct, in order to universalize, and perhaps structure, the concept of knighthood. However, the Oath, because of its inclusion of the feminine, creates conflict for it is at the same time too precise, and yet too vague, or not precise enough. This happens frequently in the *Morte*. For instance, one part of the Oath dictates that a knight must always save women who are in danger, and also says that he must show mercy to those who ask it. Another part also dictates that rape and violence against women is to be punished by death. But what happens when the rapist asks for mercy?

This happens many times in Malory, but for the purpose of this study I will only look at the scene in which Meleagant captures and rapes Guenevere. Lancelot must go after the queen and save her from the hands of her rapist. However, Lancelot here is shown to face a dilemma in terms of the Oath. After he saves Guenevere, Lancelot is ready to kill Meleagant, but Meleagant stops him and asks for mercy:

And than he cryed uppon hym lowed and seyde, ‘Moste noble knyghte sir Launcelot, save my lyff! For I yelde me unto you, and I require you, as ye be a knyght and fellow of the Table Rounde, sle me nat, for I yelde me as overcomyn, and whether I shall lyve or day, I put me in the kynges honed and yours. (662)

As a knight who has sworn an Oath, Lancelot *must* show mercy upon those who ask for it: “and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy.” And, as a knight as well, he must do ladies “socour” (75). And also, the oath dictates that any man who rapes a woman must be sentenced to death. These elements in themselves are not contradictory, but the position in which Lancelot finds himself contradicts his knightly Oath: were he to save Meleagant’s life he would dishonour Guenevere, and were he to kill Meleagant, he would betray his oath. Even Malory recognizes this dilemma for he writes, “Than sir Lancelot wyst nat what to do, for he had lever than all the good in the worlde that he might be revenged upon hym” (662). He opts to follow the queen’s order and commands Meleagant to “Aryse, for shame, and perfourme thys batayle with me to the utteraunce” (662), and by extension betrays part of his oath, because he chose to listen to the feminine voice. It is not to be denied here that the feminine creates unity in terms of the Oath, for it permits the knight to act upon it, as any knight should, to save the lady and bring justice. However, the consequences of Lancelot’s act, i.e. choosing to betray part of the Oath, appear later, when the Round Table starts to disintegrate and some of the knights turn against each other. For, from this moment on, Lancelot has chosen to put his lady first, before his Oath to his King, before his sense of brotherhood to his fellow knights. This is the first sense of disruption the feminine causes in terms of knightly brotherhood and its connection to the Oath.

Furthermore, the most notable episodes where women cause disunity are the encounters Lancelot has with the multiple Elaines. There is not a single encounter with a lady named Elaine that goes well. He is tricked, twice, into sleeping with

Elaine of Corbyn, and the result—apart from being the begetting of a son— creates significant problems between him and Guenevere, which later have huge consequences for the Round Table as a whole. And the other Elaine misinterprets the knightly signs and codes he sends her, which ultimately causes her death. For the purpose of this study, I will look at Elaine of Astolat.

Malory introduces Elaine of Astolat's entire life story in barely a few lines;

He writes,

Thys olde barown had a doughtir that was called that tyme the Fayre Mayden of Astolot, and ever she behylde Sir Launcelot wondirfully. And as the booke sayth, she keste such a love unto Sir Launcelot that she cowed never withdraw hir loove, wherefore she dyed. And her name was Elayne le Blanke. (623)

Malory does not add more about her, as her role only stands here as the faire maiden who falls in love with the bravest knight of the realm, and then dies because she cannot have him. Nevertheless, as little as her use for the plot seems, and as passive as she also may seem to be, her role has the power to create conflict. The conflict is not created directly, but through Lancelot's loyalty to his knightly code. In this scene, Lancelot needs a disguise to avoid being recognized by other knights in a jousting match. Without knowing this fact, Elaine of Astolat, who "was so hote in love that she besought sir Launcelot to were upon hym at the justis a tokyn of hers" (623), offers him her sleeve. Lancelot needs it for his disguise, and so accepts her token. However, by doing so he sends the wrong signal; Malory writes that Lancelot had "never aforne borne no maner of tokyn of no damesell" (623). Lancelot himself tells Elaine, "Never dud I erste so much for no damesell" (623), and Gawain also reconfirms that "never or that day I nor none othir knyght, I dare make good, saw

never nother herde say that ever he bare tokyn or sygne of no lady, jantillwoman, nor maydyn at no justis nother turnemente” (631). In the chivalric convention of courtly love, a knight wearing a lady’s sleeve signifies she is the lady he “worships,” or at the very least she is a lady in which he has some interest. However, in taking up this sleeve as a means of disguise, Lancelot, as writes Martin Shichtman, “neglects to consider what his gesture of wearing the sleeve signifies for Elaine” (261). Elaine takes this as a sign of his love towards her, or at least of possible love, for she says, in a discussion with Gawain, “yee truly . . . my love ys he. God wolde that I were hys love”(631). When later she asks Lancelot to marry her, he declines the offer for he declares to “never [wanting] to be a wedded man” (638). Seeing she cannot have him as her husband, she proposes he be her lover. This has the effect to shock Lancelot for declares that by doing so he would “[reward] youre fadir and youre brothir full evyll for their grete goodnesse” (638). In this instance, Elaine’s character can very well be interpreted as evil and lusty, and by extension a creator of disruption, for she, like Morgan le Fay, initiates the desire towards Lancelot, inverting gender roles of man/subject-women/object. However, Lancelot’s complete and utter refusal, in the end, contributes to her death, and Malory, by such an event, eliminates this potential threat. Nevertheless, the harm has been done: Lancelot’s actions trigger Guenevere’s anger and her feelings of betrayal. He has worn another woman’s sleeve when he was always refusing to wear hers. What is more, Malory, perhaps unconsciously, seems to constantly be comparing the two women, Elaine and Guenevere. As Felicity Riddy writes, “Malory draws [distinctions] between innocent and experience, simplicity and sophistication, openness and subterfuge”

(366). Even Guenevere seems to be aware of this comparison for she starts to keep Lancelot at distance, and by extension she drives forth the events of his soon-to-be downfall. The final breakdown caused in part by the feminine, is Guenevere's implication in the fall of the Round Table. This is not to suggest that Guenevere is the cause of the fellowship's break down because of her infidelity, but rather, because Lancelot could not be loyal to both his lord and be in love with this lord's lady without breaking the rules involving the chivalric and knightly code.

Furthermore, on a narrative level, women continuously send knights on adventures, call them for their needs, and are sent after when in danger. While doing so they, on the metatextual level, send the text in different directions, and as such break up the unity. These events take place in various situations in the narrative, namely during key moments, which constitute turning points. One of those turning points is during Arthur's wedding feast. It is the moment in which Arthur is setting up his knightly community and fellowship. However, it becomes the moment where the first break up of both the narrative and that very community happens. As all the knights and their ladies are seated and enjoying the feast, two beasts burst in and a lady after them (Malory 63). Soon, the adventures begin and the first knight is sent after the woman to free her from the clutch of another knight. Merlin states to Arthur that "thes adventures muste be brought to an ende, other ellis hit woll be disworshyp to you and to youre deste" (63). But do these adventures ever end? In Malory, they certainly do not, for as soon as one lady is saved, for instance, another is either endangered, or a knight is angry for having a fellow knight save a particular lady.

The knights not only end up fighting among each other, but also moving back and forth between the ladies they have to help.

For this study, I will only look at Pellinore, as his situation mirrors that of many of the other knights in Malory. While he is traveling to Camelot, he meets on his way a lady, whom, Malory writes, “hys [Pellinor’s] queste” (72). She in turn asks him to go and help another lady in her quarrel: “Sir knyght, . . . yondir ar two knyghts that fyght for thys lady. Go ye thyder and departe them, and be ye agreed with them, and than may ye have . . . youre plesure” (72). He goes to help this other damsel in distress, and meets the two knights that are causing her turmoil. He finds himself drawn into the fight, but he finally wins the battle because of his prowess. Pellinore never goes back to the first lady, but takes the second one with him to Camelot. Malory later tells his readers that the lady in question is Nymue. On his way, however, Pellinore and Nymue find a wounded knight and yet again a lady with him. This unnamed woman, whom Pellinore later discovers to be his own long lost daughter, asks for assistance in the healing of her knight. He fails to provide the help for once again he goes off on another adventure, and only comes back later.

Malory writes,

And as they com by the welle thereas the wounded knyght was and the lady, there he founde the knyght and the lady etyn with lyons other with wylde bestis, all save the hede, wherefore he made grete sorrow and wepte passynge sore. (74)

The results of his moving back and forth, without any particular pattern, cause the gruesome death of two people, as well as the disruption of any possibility of having a flowing narrative. Pellinore is also well aware that this scene of destruction he sees is caused by his quests, which the women had sent him on, for he states quite

pitifully, “Alas! hir lyff might I have saved, but I was so ferse in my queste that I wolde nat abyde” (74).

Conversely, as unity, the feminine focuses and protects heteronormativity and homosocial bonds among knights, and by extension allows them to perceive themselves as men/knights capable of following their Oath. For as many of the female figures remain submissive and in need of help, it allows the feminine to take in and secure the entire sphere of the human and the social, even though in terms of binary –good/evil, fair/foul, success/failure, protection/destruction. In the end, the subtextual feminine presence is powerful. It supports Malory’s text, and at the same time, it disrupts it by disturbing knightly/gender ideology. Ultimately, it could be said that, on a larger scale, the feminine controls the text, and through this usage, the feminine, whether female or feminized, gains a certain form of power in a world dominated by patriarchal ideology, and becomes actively involved in the knightly, chivalric, and courtly enterprise.

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